

An Examination of Student Engagement and Retention in an Honors Program

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Honors programs at colleges and universities provide academic and developmental opportunities for high-ability students. Learning communities, defined as a group of students who live together, are connected through membership in a common organization, and take classes together, are often a component of honors programs. Learning communities provide an academic and social community that complements curricular requirements. At the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK), a higher education institution in the Midwest, ninety percent of the freshman honor students live together and ninety-five percent take an honors class in their first semester on campus. The honors program at UNK is classified as a learning community; however, the term has varying definitions based on the classification of upper- and lower-division students at different institutions. Most research on learning communities focuses just on first-year students and the first-year experience. Very little research focuses on learning communities that include upper-division students.

BACKGROUND

Research has shown many positive effects for students participating in a learning community, including a positive effect on academic performance (Zhao & Kuh) and higher levels of academic effort and academic integration (Zhao & Kuh; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick). Learning communities also increase higher-order thinking and positive diversity experiences (Pike et al.). Students in learning communities tend to have increased interaction with staff and faculty, and they are more likely than students outside of learning communities to view the campus as being supportive (Zhao, & Kuh; Pike et al.). Finally, learning communities have been found to increase student retention and engagement, which is correlated with positive educational gains (Rocconi).

Inclusion of a learning community in honors programs can be complex. Studies have found that planning and programming must be in place for the learning community to benefit students (Frazier & Eighmy; Yao & Wawrzynski), requiring coordination between academic affairs and student affairs, for instance (Shushok & Sriram). The location of the residence hall is also important as well as the design of the interior space (Daffron & Holland). Learning communities can also have negative consequences, creating social environments similar to high school, with cliques, excessive socializing, misconduct, and disruptive behavior. Groupthink can also affect the population, undermining interaction with faculty and chilling the intellectual environment (Jaffee). These issues must be addressed in order to maximize the benefits of the learning community.

Understanding the impacts, both positive and negative, of learning communities is essential, and so is understanding what draws students to an honors program and keeps them involved. Nichols and Chang surveyed the members of the South Dakota State University (SDSU) Honors College to help understand student engagement in the program. They identified the most important factors for students who decided to join the honors college, the reasons the students stayed in the program, their level of satisfaction, and the characteristics of the students who were in the program. They found that the most significant factors influencing decisions to join the SDSU Honors College were competitive advantage for the students, smaller classes, connections with faculty, prestige, and opportunities for deeper learning. The most important factors influencing student decisions to continue in the honors college were the quality of the honors learning environment, connections

to honors college faculty, and priority registration. Their survey showed that peers were not a top reason for students to continue in the honors college as previous research had indicated. A notable example of such research is a study by Astin, who found that the peer group had a large effect on students and their decisions, especially related to academics. This disparity may be the difference between an observed impact and student perception.

The finding in some studies that peers are a top reason to continue in honors programs could be related to the fact that most research on learning communities has focused on first-year students and the first-year experience. The peer influence could be different if upper-division students were included in the research. In 2006, LaVine & Mitchell called for learning community research that includes upper-division students, but little has appeared to date. Nichols and Chang did, however, gather data on upper-division students in 2013 and found that as students advanced, the influence of prestige on persistence in honors gradually decreased. The influence of class size and quality also fell during the sophomore and junior year but then rose up again during the senior year. The students' satisfaction was highest with their relations to faculty, the dean of the honors college, the living and learning community, and their overall honors experience. The fact that the relationship with faculty had a high rating offers a connection to learning communities. According to Astin, faculty have a large influence on students and their satisfaction. At SDSU, "Seniors ranked satisfaction with their fellow honors students highest; for freshmen, satisfaction with the Honors Living and Learning Community was highest; and juniors gave slightly lower scores than other students to most of the components except honors courses and faculty" (Nichols & Chang 111). This finding seems to show that learning communities are satisfying for students and that, as students get near the end of their time in college, they begin to appreciate their peers more.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

We were particularly interested in how student engagement in an honors program evolves as students progress from freshmen to seniors. We have observed that upperclassman, as they progress through college, tend to identify more with other affiliations, such as Greek organizations, student clubs, and their major departments. To continue the research into the differences between upper- and lower-division students in honors programs started by Nichols & Chang, we investigated the honors program experience at UNK

that includes a learning community in the four-year honors program. Part of the purpose of this research study was to examine student engagement from the perspective of lower- and upper-division students. Determining the community dynamics of students in the honors program and the elements that are most valuable to them is important in planning and designing a successful learning community, as indicated by previous research (Frazier & Eighmy; Yao & Wawrzynski). Also critical is understanding the differences between lower- and upper-division students in order to design programming specifically targeted for each group to enhance satisfaction and retention of students in the honors program. The research questions designed for this study are as follows:

1. What are the key factors that influence a student's decision to enroll in the honors program?
2. What are the key factors that influence honors students to stay in the honors program, and is there a difference in the factors between upper- and lower-division students?
3. What do students find to be the challenging aspects of the honors program, and is there a difference between upper- and lower-division students?
4. What aspects of the honors program are students most satisfied with, and is there a difference in the satisfaction between upper- and lower-division students?

We hypothesized that there would be significant differences between upper- and lower-division students in their reasons for remaining in the honors program, their challenges, and their satisfaction with the program. We were then interested in how an honors program might better engage upper-division students.

METHOD

Because Nichols and Chang's research aligned with our study interests, we gained permission from the authors to implement their survey at UNK. Their approach was valuable to designing a program that engages upper-division students in an honors program community, both at UNK and across the country, based on student perceptions. Prior to data collection, the Institutional Review Board at UNK approved the study.

Participants

The program had 442 enrolled students at the time of the survey, and all were invited to complete the survey along with 96 recent graduates. The recent graduates were counted as upper-division students. Participants ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-four.

Materials

We used the survey created by Nichols and Chang to gather data, recreating it in Qualtrics with only minimal changes to adapt it to the UNK Honors Program context and terminology. We changed statements to include terminology used at UNK, e.g., “honors program” instead of “honors college,” and we changed the activities that students could select to activities included on the UNK campus. The survey was sent to students in an email that provided a consent form to participate and a link to take the survey.

Procedure

An email notification about the survey was sent to all 442 current honors students and also 96 recent graduates; however, not all students opened the email, as indicated by the Qualtrics program. The email contained information about the survey and its purpose so that students could make an informed decision about whether to complete it. Students had the option of consenting to take the survey or declining without any penalty to them. Students who chose to take the survey were asked to complete it within two weeks through Qualtrics. Completion time was about fifteen to twenty minutes.

RESULTS

We emailed the survey to 538 honors students at UNK; 210 opened the email; and 62 completed it, giving us a 30% completion rate. Of the 62 students, 51 were female and 11 male; 34 were lower-division students and 28 upper-division. Together, the students who completed the survey had a mean high school GPA of 3.95 and a mean ACT score of 29.5. The mean college GPA for the students who completed the survey was 3.83.

Students were asked about their initial decision to enroll in the honors program. The top two responses were “competitive advantage” and “prestige,” with 19 ranking competitive advantage as extremely influential and 26 ranking prestige extremely influential. As shown in Table 1, the other responses were

parents (19), teachers (1), peers (3), small class size (8), connections with faculty (9), supplemental opportunities (9), and opportunities for deeper learning (16). (All tables are included in the Appendix.) The students had the opportunity to list any other significant factors that influenced their decision in becoming part of the honors program. Twenty-four students offered responses to this question, with the highest responses being scholarships, living in Men's Hall, and registering for classes early.

Students were asked how they first learned about the honors program. Fifty-nine students responded to this question. Students indicated that they heard about the honors program through their high school counselor (10), the UNK Website (10), from siblings (7), from friends (6), through a mailing (6), and by applying for scholarships (4). Students were also asked about activities in which they participated, and they indicated participation in honors social activities (36), living/learning community (24), undergraduate research (23), book club (22), service activities (16), study abroad (9), Honors Fall Convocation (8), and Honors Student Activity Board (6). Students were then asked to share what activities they suggested for the future in an open-ended question format. Responses with the highest frequencies were social gatherings with an emphasis on meeting others (9), professional development opportunities (5), volunteering and making changes to the mentoring program (3), and guest speakers and leadership opportunities (2).

Several statistical analyses were conducted to answer the research questions. Friedman's one-way repeated measures ANOVA was used to analyze the data due to violations of the assumption of normality (Field). A statistically significant difference was found in the initial reason for enrollment in the honors program at UNK, $\chi^2(8) = 161.033, p < .001$. Step-down follow-up analysis revealed that the most influential reason for students to enroll in the honors program was competitive edge (Mean = 7.44) and prestige (Mean = 6.77) as compared to all other reasons listed, $p = .03$. In addition, a statistically significant difference emerged in the reasons for enrolling between honors program teachers (Mean = 3.07) and opportunities for deeper learning (Mean = 5.43), $p = .01$ (see Table 5).

A statistically significant difference also occurred in reasons why students decided to stay in the honors program at UNK, $\chi^2(8) = 143.481, p < .001$. Step-down follow-up analysis revealed that priority registration (Mean = 7.12) and prestige (M = 6.90) were the two key factors in students' decision to remain in the honors program as compared to all other reasons listed, $p = .001$. Peer influence (Mean = 2.82) was the least influential reason for students to remain in the honors program as compared to all other reasons (see Table 5).

Differences between upper- and lower-division students in each of the key factors in retention were tested using the Mann-Whitney U test (Field), and several factors were found to be significantly different. The connection with faculty was significantly more influential to lower-division students ($Mdn = 3.28$) than upper-division students ($Mdn = 2.62$) as a reason to stay in the honors program, $U = 588.500$, $z = 2.176$, $p = .03$, $r = .281$, medium effect size. Small class size was also more important to lower-division students ($Mdn = 3.16$) than upper-division students ($Mdn = 2.00$), $U = 664.00$, $z = 3.330$, $p = .001$, $r = .425$, medium effect size. The quality of classes was more influential to lower-division students ($Mdn = 3.88$) than upper-division students ($Mdn = 2.54$), $U = 672.00$, $z = 3.452$, $p = .001$, $r = .445$. The community with other honors students was more influential to lower-division students ($Mdn = 3.50$) than to upper-division students ($Mdn = 2.42$), $U = 617.00$, $z = 2.883$, $p = .004$, $r = .372$, medium effect size, and supplemental opportunities were significantly more important to lower-division students ($Mdn = 3.81$) than upper-division students ($Mdn = 2.35$), $U = 703.500$, $z = 3.931$, $p < .001$, $r = .507$, large effect size (See Table 2).

Analysis of the most challenging aspect of the honors program revealed a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(4) = 68.943$, $p < .001$. Step-down follow-up analysis revealed that the Senior Thesis (Mean = 3.75) and the Honors H-Options (Mean = 3.52) were significantly more challenging than all other challenges listed, $p = .01$. No significant differences occurred, however, between upper- and lower-division students in the challenging aspects of the honors program (see Tables 3 and 5).

Examination of student satisfaction with the honors program revealed a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(7) = 28.182$, $p < .001$. Step-down follow-up analysis revealed that honors program faculty (Mean = 5.27) and fellow peers (Mean = 4.84) were significantly more important than the activities and opportunities in the program, $p = .035$ (see Table 5).

Differences between upper- and lower-division students in each of the areas of satisfaction explored were tested using the Mann-Whitney U test, and only one of several factors was found to be significantly different between the upper- and lower-division students. Lower-division students were significantly more satisfied with the advising and support ($Mdn = 4.50$) than upper-division students ($Mdn = 3.13$), $U = 656.50$, $z = 2.983$, $p = .03$, $r = .382$, medium effect size (see Table 4).

DISCUSSION

This research study was designed to examine the factors that are influential in a student's decision to enroll in an honors program and the reasons they choose to stay in the program. We found that more students received information about the honors program from high school counselors and on their own through the university's website than from other sources. Students chose to enroll in the honors program as a result of their perception that they would gain a competitive edge and the perceived prestige that comes from being in an honors program. Our results at UNK echo Nichols and Chang's finding that competitive advantage and prestige were the most important reasons for joining the SDSU Honors College. From the program's perspective, prestige and competitive advantage are not the ideal factors for recruiting new students compared to deeper learning opportunities and participation in a community of motivated learners, but perhaps why they join us is less important than the benefits they gain from their experience.

When students at UNK were asked why they remained in the honors program, priority registration and prestige were at the top of the list. Peer influence was found to be the least significant reason for students to stay in the program. Lower-division students were more likely to identify class size and quality along with the student community as priority factors, probably because lower-division students are more likely to live in the honors residence hall and take honors general studies classes than the upper-division students.

This project arose from a concern about the continued engagement of upper-division students in the honors program. We explored the differences between upper- and lower-division students to determine if honors program staff could account for any such differences in attracting and retaining students. While some upper-division students remained actively engaged in social and academic extracurricular activities, the majority shifted their focus toward their academic major, which raised the question of whether programming should be refined to better maintain upper-division student engagement in the honors program or the shift in affiliation is appropriate. We had assumed significant differences between upper- and lower-division students in their reasons for remaining in the honors program, their challenges, and their satisfaction with the program, and we did find differences in reasons for remaining and program satisfaction. The lower-division students, for instance, were more influenced to stay in the program as a result of connections to faculty, small class size, quality of classes, the community of other honors students, and supplemental opportunities. The lower-division students were also more

satisfied with the advising and support in the program than the upper-division students. While we had also expected differences between upper- and lower-division students in what they found challenging, we did not find any significant differences.

The results of this study can be seen as natural outcomes of honors programming at UNK. That upper-division students shift their identification to their major, as our results indicated, is a logical consequence of the increased specialization that characterizes undergraduate education. In a decision whether programming should be designed to keep upper-division students engaged in the honors community, the answer must be rooted in what is best for the students. Program evaluation reports at UNK have indicated that the honors program has a non-completion rate of about 20%, and we need to consider whether that rate is appropriate or not. The honors program staff might be able to focus on new opportunities, beyond what academic departments can offer, to help honors students with their transition into post-graduation positions; these might include study abroad programs and national scholarships.

Continued interaction leads to continued advising, whether formal or casual. Programming that attracts honors students—such as student/alumni social events, formal mentoring programs, group advising sessions, or even free printing—increases the interactions that honors students have with peers and others. Social capital theory suggests that such trusting relationships enable a group to succeed collectively and individually (Putnam).

We conclude from this project that we need to generate new initiatives in order to increase the involvement of upper-division honors students in the honors community. Programming must be of particular value to those students to attract them, and certainly not all will respond, but we need to create opportunities for those who will benefit.

Limitations

One major limitation of the study is the response rate of eligible participants. Eleven percent of the total population completed our survey, and these respondents self-selected. Results, therefore, cannot be considered characteristic of the UNK honors students nor of honors students in general. Secondly, the respondents were disproportionately female: 82%, when the program population is about 70% female. However, the data were consistent with results in a previous study at another institution as well as preliminary qualitative work at UNK.

Direction for Future Research

Research on student engagement in honors programs would benefit from more focus on the difference between lower-division and upper-division students to determine whether honors programs should be targeting their upper-division students more aggressively or concentrating more on lower-division students. Providing the right type of programming at the right time is an important part of program planning. More research is also needed to help resolve different opinions about the importance of peers: Nichols & Chang found that peers were not important in the engagement of honors students while Astin found that peers were an important factor in the quality of undergraduate education in general. Technology may be another factor: it is changing social relationships in general, so it may be affecting learning communities as well. These questions require ongoing attention as the landscape of honors programs and the students who enroll in them change.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1. KEY FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE A STUDENT’S DECISION TO ENROLL IN THE HONORS PROGRAM

Question:	1 (Not Influential)	2	3	4	5 (Extremely Influential)	Total Number
Parents	5 L = 3, U = 2	11 L = 8, U = 2, 1 unknown grade	13 L = 8, U = 5	15 L = 6, U = 9	19 L = 9, U = 10	63
Teachers	21 L = 9, U = 11, 1 unknown grade	17 L = 10, U = 7	9 L = 7, U = 2	15 L = 7, U = 8	1 L = 1, U = 0	63
Peers/Community with other Honors Program Students	21 L = 10, U = 11	11 L = 8, U = 3	16 L = 8, U = 7, 1 unknown grade	12 L = 7, U = 5	3 L = 1, U = 2	63
Prestige	1 L = 0, U = 1	4 L = 1, U = 3	10 L = 6, U = 3, 1 unknown grade	22 L = 12, U = 10	26 L = 15, U = 11	63
Competitive Advantage	2 L = 0, U = 2	1 L = 0, U = 1	4 L = 0, U = 4	15 L = 9, U = 6	40 L = 25, U = 15	62
Small Class Size	10 L = 2, U = 8	11 L = 8, U = 3	15 L = 8, U = 7	18 L = 10, U = 8	8 L = 6, U = 2	62
Connections with Faculty	13 L = 3, U = 10	8 L = 4, U = 4	16 L = 8, U = 8	16 L = 11, U = 5	9 L = 8, U = 1	62

Supplemental Opportunities	11 L = 2, U = 9	10 L = 5, U = 5	17 L = 10, U = 7	15 L = 9, U = 6	9 L = 8, U = 1	62
Opportunities for Deeper Learning	8 L = 3, U = 5	9 L = 4, U = 5	12 L = 6, U = 6	17 L = 10, U = 7	16 L = 11, U = 5	62

Note: L = lower-division students and U = upper-division students

TABLE 2. KEY FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE HONORS STUDENTS TO STAY IN THE HONORS PROGRAM

Question	1 (Not Influential)	2	3	4	5 (Extremely Influential)	Total Responses
Peers' Influence	26 L = 11, U = 15	14 L = 9, U = 5	13 L = 8, U = 5	7 L = 4, U = 3	1 L = 1, U = 0	61
Parents' Influence	17 L = 7, U = 10	12 L = 10, U = 2	12 L = 5, U = 7	11 L = 6, U = 5	9 L = 5, U = 4	61
Prestige	3 L = 1, U = 2	1 L = 1, U = 0	8 L = 6, U = 2	19 L = 9, U = 10	30 L = 16, U = 14	61
Connection to Honors Program Faculty	9 L = 2, U = 7	17 L = 10, U = 7	11 L = 4, U = 7	13 L = 9, U = 4	11 L = 8, U = 3	61
Small Class Size	17 L = 4, U = 13	13 L = 6, U = 7	13 L = 9, U = 4	12 L = 9, U = 3	6 L = 5, U = 1	61
Quality of Classes	10 L = 1, U = 9	7 L = 3, U = 4	12 L = 6, U = 6	17 L = 12, U = 5	15 L = 11, U = 4	61
Community with other Honors Program Students	15 L = 5, U = 10	7 L = 1, U = 6	14 L = 9, U = 5	10 L = 7, U = 3	14 L = 10, U = 4	60
Supplemental Opportunities	14 L = 2, U = 12	7 L = 3, U = 4	9 L = 5, U = 4	16 L = 11, U = 5	15 L = 12, U = 3	61
Access to Priority Registration	3 L = 1, U = 2	2 L = 0, U = 2	2 L = 1, U = 1	18 L = 10, U = 8	36 L = 21, U = 15	61

Note: L = lower-division students and U = upper-division students

TABLE 3. CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF THE HONORS PROGRAM

Question	1 (Not Challenging)	2	3	4	5 (Extremely Challenging)	Total Responses
Maintaining Required Grade Point Average	25 L = 10, U = 15	16 L = 10, U = 6	9 L = 7, U = 2	12 L = 7, U = 5	0 L = 0, U = 0	62
Completing Honors General Education Courses	27 L = 12, U = 15	18 L = 11, U = 7	14 L = 10, U = 4	3 L = 1, U = 2	0 L = 0, U = 0	62
Completing Honors H-Options	6 L = 1, U = 5	14 L = 9, U = 5	20 L = 14, U = 6	18 L = 7, U = 11	4 L = 3, U = 1	62
Completing the Honors Senior Study	4 L = 1, U = 3	8 L = 4, U = 4	23 L = 13, U = 10	21 L = 13, U = 8	6 L = 3, U = 3	62
Making Honors Program Requirements fit with my Academic Program	12 L = 5, U = 7	14 L = 6, U = 8	14 L = 10, U = 4	20 L = 13, U = 7	2 L = 0, U = 2	62

Note: L = lower-division students and U = upper-division students

TABLE 4. ASPECTS OF THE HONORS PROGRAM THAT STUDENTS ARE MOST SATISFIED WITH

Question	1 (Extremely Dissatisfied)	2	3	4	5 (Extremely Satisfied)	Total Responses
Honors Program Courses	0 L = 0, U = 0	4 L = 2, U = 2	13 L = 4, U = 9	31 L = 19, U = 12	14 L = 9, U = 5	62
Honors Program Faculty	0 L = 0, U = 0	5 L = 1, U = 4	9 L = 5, U = 4	27 L = 15, U = 12	21 L = 13, U = 8	62
Advising and Support for Honors Program Students	0 L = 0, U = 0	9 L = 3, U = 6	14 L = 4, U = 10	20 L = 13, U = 7	19 L = 14, U = 5	62
Honors Program Office	0 L = 0, U = 0	3 L = 1, U = 2	20 L = 10, U = 10	24 L = 13, U = 11	15 L = 10, U = 5	62
Honors Program Activities and Opportunities	3 L = 0, U = 3	7 L = 4, U = 3	24 L = 13, U = 11	18 L = 11, U = 7	10 L = 6, U = 4	62
Honors Program Facilities	0 L = 0, U = 0	5 L = 2, U = 3	19 L = 9, U = 10	26 L = 17, U = 9	11 L = 6, U = 5	61
Fellow Honors Program Students	1 L = 0, U = 1	5 L = 3, U = 2	10 L = 5, U = 5	26 L = 13, U = 13	18 L = 13, U = 5	60
Honors Program Living Learning Community	2 L = 1, U = 1	2 L = 2, U = 0	4 L = 1, U = 3	10 L = 6, U = 4	10 L = 6, U = 4	28
My Overall Honors Program Experience	1 L = 0, U = 1	4 L = 0, U = 4	15 L = 8, U = 7	26 L = 17, U = 9	16 L = 9, U = 7	62

Note: L = lower-division students and U = upper-division students

TABLE 5. SUMMARY OF FRIEDMAN’S ONE-WAY REPEATED MEASURES ANOVAS FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN AN HONORS PROGRAM

	χ^2	df	p	M	p
Initial Reason for Enrollment in the Honors Program	161.033	8	<.001***		
Most Influential: Competitive Edge and Prestige				7.44, 6.77	.03*
Deeper Learning vs. Teachers				5.43, 3.07	.01**
Retention Factors for Honors Students	143.481	8	<.001***		
Most Influential Factors: Priority Registration and Prestige				7.12, 6.90	>.001***
Least Influential: Peer Influence				2.82	<.001***
Challenging Aspects of the Honors Program	68.943	4	<.001***		
Most Challenging: Senior Thesis and Honors H-Option Courses				3.75, 3.52	.01**
Factors in Student Satisfaction	28.182	7	<.001***		
Most Satisfied with: Honors Program Faculty and Fellow Peers				5.27, 4.84	.035*

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001